

VZCZCXR07749

PP RUEHBC RUEHKUK RUEHMOS

DE RUEHIHL #0044/01 0730851

ZNY SSSSS ZZH

P 140851Z MAR 06

FM REO HILLAH

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0574

INFO RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0560

RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

RUEHIHL/REO HILLAH 0623

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 HILLAH 000044

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 3/14/2016

TAGS: [PBTS](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [KCRM](#) [IR](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: WELCOME TO IRAQ: SCENES FROM THE IRAQ-IRAN BORDER CROSSING
AT ZORBATIYAH

HILLAH 00000044 001.2 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY: GARY ANDERSON, ACTING REGIONAL COORDINATOR, REO,
AL-HILLAH, STATE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (S/NF) SUMMARY. A March 8 visit by Regional Embassy Office Al-Hillah staff to the Arafat Border Patrol station and Zorbatiyah Point of Entry (PoE) confirmed continuing reports of nearly unrestricted movement of people and goods across the Iran/Iraq border in Northeast Wasit province. The Border Patrol checkpoint immediately adjacent to the PoE does not actively patrol the border, nor does it conduct searches of persons and vehicles. A nearby parking lot on the Iraqi side through which all vehicles and pedestrians from Iran must pass before heading into Iraq is reported to be a major source of illegal revenue for select members of the Wasit Provincial Council and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). END SUMMARY.

EARLY ARRIVAL CATCHES BORDER OFFICIALS BY SURPRISE

¶2. (S/NF) On the morning of March 8, Regional Embassy Office Al-Hillah staff traveled to the Iraqi Border Patrol Arafat Checkpoint in Northeast Wasit province to meet with Brigadier General Abdel Rudha, commander of the 170 km of border that Wasit shares with Iran. The checkpoint is set back approximately 1000 meters (on the Iraqi side) from the administratively separate Zorbatiyah Point of Entry (PoE) where customs and immigration inspections are conducted. When REO staff arrived, the Border Patrol Checkpoint was nearly empty, and General Rudha was delayed at his office elsewhere. With some delay and visible consternation, the Iraqi Border Patrol officer in charge of the checkpoint agreed to brief REO staff on checkpoint operations. According to the officer, the most pressing problems facing his men are a lack of vehicles as well as fuel shortages. Both prevent border troops from conducting patrols in their area of responsibility.

¶3. (S/NF) General Rudha arrived approximately twenty minutes after REO staff. After immediately dismissing his deputy, Rudha repeated the complaints about a shortage of resources. In Rudha's opinion the Arafat checkpoint was by far the most problematic of the approximately twenty under his command, largely because the Zorbatiyah Point of Entry a short distance away is not under his control, rather under the control of General Abdel Rahman of the Ministry of Interior. Rudha related that at other (sparsely trafficked) Points of Entry, men under his command controlled both the Point of Entry and the adjacent Border Patrol checkpoint.

¶4. (S/NF) According to Rudha, though smuggling is known to be a widespread problem along the border, the Border Patrol troops under his command lack the authority to search vehicles after they clear the Zorbatiyah Point of Entry and move towards the interior of the province. Rudha also related that he was unable to fulfill his responsibility of monitoring the constant patrols from Iranian Revolutionary Guards and regular Iranian Border Patrol units. NOTE: Rudha's predecessor, a Border Patrol Colonel, was relieved of his command and arrested in November 2005 on charges of corruption and smuggling. END NOTE.

**ZORBATIYAH POINT OF ENTRY: VEHICULAR AND PEDESTRIAN TRAFFIC
PASSES THROUGH UN-INSPECTED**

¶5. (S/NF) Following the briefing and tour of the Arafat Border Patrol station, REO staff traveled with Rudha to the Zorbatiyah Point of Entry (PoE). During the two-minute drive, REO staff observed a long line of dump trucks and other heavy vehicles driving un-inspected across the border into a walled-off lot in Iranian territory. What appeared to be the same trucks then departed the lot and returned to Iraqi territory without any apparent inspection by Iraqi authorities. This continued throughout the visit. Rudha informed REO staff that this took place on a daily basis, and that the Border Patrol had neither the authority nor the resources to conduct spot checks on the trucks.

6. (S/NF) The operational portion of the Zorbatiyah PoE consists of a large open-walled pavilion leading from the edge of the Iranian side of the checkpoint into Iraqi territory. Within the pavilion there are employees of several cabinet ministries responsible for conducting customs, immigration, and agricultural inspections. There are also several dilapidated structures in the complex that are no longer in use. During the visit of REO staff a steady flow of foot traffic passed through the building with minimal and/or no apparent inspection.

HILLAH 00000044 002.2 OF 002

¶7. (S/NF) When REO staff arrived at the PoE, there was very little visible Iraqi Police or Iraqi Army presence. Within minutes, several vanloads of soldiers were on site, and accompanied REO staff on a tour of the complex. REO staff declined the invitation to visit the line of demarcation between Iraq and Iran, instead remaining approximately 50-75 meters from the line as a crowd gathered on the Iranian side of the border. There were also several trucks (on the Iraqi side) carrying armed employees of the Al-Ahsan Company, a private firm providing security for Iranian pilgrims in Iraq.

¶8. (S/NF) General Abdel Rahman from the Ministry of Interior then led REO staff on a tour of the Zorbatiyah PoE complex. Rahman, as always dressed in civilian clothes, complained vigorously that the PoE was inadequately staffed and lacked proper detection equipment to search vehicles. NOTE: The IA and IP forces present at the Zorbatiyah PoE do not report to Rudha of the Border Patrol, there are questions as to who has final authority over people, vehicles and goods crossing the border. In his complaint about inadequate staffing, Rahman did not acknowledge the nearby presence of Rudha and his Border Patrol unit. END NOTE.

THE SHAYKH BASHAR PARKING LOT: SCIRI SHAKEDOWN?

¶9. (S/NF) The most thorough inspections of people and goods appear to take place in a large privately owned parking lot adjacent to the Border Patrol checkpoint on the Iraqi side. In October 2005, the Wasit Provincial Council seized control of the parking lot from Shaykh Bashar Kadhim Essa. According to U.S. military and provincial contacts, up to USD 30,000 per day is collected from vehicles passing through this lot. This money is then shared between officials at the border, members of the

Provincial Council, high-ranking members of the Badr Organization, with the lions' share directed to the Wasit Branch of SCIRI. From their vehicles, REO staff were able to observe inspections of vehicles by unidentified personnel at the parking lot.

¶110. (S/NF) COMMENT. The Point of Entry at Zorbatiyah, since its reopening in 2003, has become the critical border crossing on Wasit's lengthy border with Iran. During the two-hour long visit by REO staff, no Iraqi official could conclusively claim responsibility for the flow of goods and people across the border. Despite relatively new facilities, the operations-particularly at Zorbatiyah-had a haphazard and lazy quality to them. Contacts throughout the province also place Generals Rudha and Rahman at the center of the pervasive climate of shakedowns and smuggling along the border. Regardless of the relatively stable security situation in the province, the border crossing at Zorbatiyah remains a critical vulnerability. END COMMENT.

ANDERSON